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FEDERAL FOOD STANDARDS

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All over the United States, if you buy mayonnaise, you can be sure you're getting essentially the same product. And if you buy USDA Choice beef, you can be sure it's the same quality.

The various kinds of food standards set by the Federal Government make this possible.

Standards of identity set by the Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) define what certain food products are, and USDA and U.S. Department of Commerce grade standards define levels of quality for various foods.

Standards of identity are mandatory. They set requirements which products must meet if they move in interstate commerce. They protect against deception, because they define what a food product must consist of to be legally labeled and sold by its common or usual name--"mayonnaise," for example.

USDA grade standards for food are voluntary. Federal law does not require that a food processor or distributor use the grade standards. The standards are widely used, however, as an aid in wholesale trading, because the quality of a product affects its price. The grade (quality level) also is often shown on food products in retail stores, so consumers can choose the grade that best fits their needs.

Here is a brief listing of the principal Federal standards for food.

VOLUNTARY STANDARDS

U.S. Department of Agriculture Grade Standards

Under authority of the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1946 and related statutes, USDA has issued grade standards for over 300 food products.

Grade standards have been established for: beef, veal and calf, lamb and mutton, and pork; poultry, including turkey, chicken, duck, goose, guinea, squab, and domestic rabbit; eggs; dairy products, including butter, Cheddar cheese, and instant nonfat dry milk; fresh fruits, vegetables, and nuts; canned, frozen, and dried fruits and vegetables, and related products such as preserves; and rice, dry beans, and peas. U.S. grade standards are also available for grains, but not for processed grain food products, such as flour or cereal.

FOOD SAFETY AND QUALITY SERVICE • U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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USDA provides official grading services, often in cooperation with State departments of agriculture, for a fee, to packers, processors, distributors, or others who wish official certification of the grade of a product. The grade standards also are often used by packers and processors as a quality control tool.

Federal law does not require use of the U.S. grade standards or the official grading services. Official grading is required under some State and local ordinances and some industry marketing programs.

Products which have been officially graded may carry the USDA grade name or grade shield, such as the familiar purple "USDA Choice" shield seen on cuts of beef or the "U.S. Grade A" on cartons of eggs. Grade labeling, however, is not required by Federal law, even though a product has been officially graded.

National Marine Fisheries Service Grade Standards

The U.S. Department of Commerce's National Marine Fisheries Service provides grade standards and grading services for fishery products similar to those provided by USDA for other foods. The Commerce grading program also provides for official inspection for edibility and wholesomeness of fishery products, and many of its grade standards specify the amount of fish component required in a product. To date, 20 U.S. grade standards have been developed for frozen processed fishery products, covering fish fillets and fillet blocks; raw fish portions and fish steaks; raw breaded and precooked fish portions and fish sticks; raw headless and raw breaded shrimp; raw and precooked breaded scallops; and raw headless whiting. Such products when produced and graded under the U.S. Department of Commerce inspection program may carry the USDC "Federal Inspection" mark and/or the U.S. grade shield. However, as under the USDA grading programs, grade labeling is not required by Federal law, even though products are officially inspected and graded.

MANDATORY STANDARDS

U.S. Department of Agriculture Standards of Composition and Identity

Under the Federal Meat Inspection Act and the Poultry Products Inspection Act, USDA establishes composition, preparation, and labeling requirements which certain meat and poultry products must meet to be legally manufactured and sold.

The requirements may cover only meat content of a product (standard of composition) or may go further to establish a standard of identity or definition.

Standards of identity set specific ingredients a food must contain, such as kind and amount of meat, percent of fat or moisture, and what additives, if any, may be used if a product is to be labeled or identified by a common product name.

Some standards, in addition, set specific processing requirements, such as cooking and other procedures, to assure wholesomeness and safety of the finished product.

The specific content and labeling requirements help assure the consumer that he's getting what the label says he's getting. Standards, however, do not keep different companies from making distinctive recipes. For example, the USDA content requirement for beef stew specifies only the minimum percentage of beef (25 percent) that the stew must contain. It doesn't keep a manufacturer from using combinations of other ingredients or increasing the amount of beef to make his product unique.

Food and Drug Administration Standards

The Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act provides for three kinds of mandatory standards for products being shipped across State lines: standards of identity, standards of minimum quality, and standards of fill of container. All these standards are administered by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The law sets forth penalties for noncompliance.

Standards of Identity

FDA standards of identity (like USDA's) establish what a given food product is--for example, what a food must be to be labeled "preserves." The FDA standards of identity also provide for use of optional ingredients in addition to the mandatory ingredients that make the product what it is.

FDA has standards of identity for a large number of food products (excluding meat and poultry products, which are covered by USDA).

Types of products for which standards of identity have been formulated by FDA include: cacao products; cereal flour and related products; macaroni and noodle products; bakery products; milk and cream products; cheese and cheese products; frozen desserts; food flavoring; dressings for food; canned fruits and fruit juices; fruit butters; jellies, preserves, and related products; soda water; canned and frozen shellfish; eggs and egg products; oleomargarine and margarine; nut products; canned vegetables; and tomato products.

Minimum Standards of Quality

FDA standards of quality have been set for a number of canned fruits and vegetables to supplement standards of identity. These are minimum standards for such factors as tenderness, color, and freedom from defects. They are regulatory, as opposed to USDA grade standards of quality, which are for voluntary use.

If a food does not meet the FDA quality standards, it must be labeled "Below Standard in Quality; Good Food--Not High Grade." Or, words may be substituted for the second part of that statement to show in what respect the product is substandard. The label could read, "Below Standard in Quality; Excessively Broken" or "Below Standard in Quality; Excessive Peel." The consumer seldom if ever sees a product with a substandard label.

(When USDA grade standards are developed for a product for which FDA has a minimum standard of quality, the requirements for the lowest grade level USDA sets are at least as high as the FDA minimum. USDA grade standards for canned tomatoes, for example, are U.S. Grades A, B, and C. U.S. Grade C is comparable to FDA's minimum standard of quality.)

Standards of Fill of Container

These standards tell the packer how full a container must be to avoid deception. They prevent the selling of air or water in place of food.

RECOMMENDED STANDARDS

Under the Public Health Service Act, FDA advises State and local governments on sanitation standards required for prevention of infectious diseases.

The most familiar and widely adopted standards deal with production, processing, and distribution of "Grade A" milk. In contrast to USDA quality grade standards for food, the Public Health Service standard for Grade A milk is largely a standard of wholesomeness. The Grade A designation on fresh milk means that it has met State or local requirements, which usually follow provisions of FDA model ordinances.

In recent years, USDA has issued recommended standards of quality for manufacturing milk and recommended standards for the manufacture of frozen desserts, which are for adoption by State regulatory agencies. These standards are being adopted, in part or in full, by States that produce manufacturing milk.

INTERNATIONAL FOOD STANDARDS

The Codex Alimentarius Commission, an international body established by the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization of the United Nations, develops food standards to protect consumers' health and facilitate world trade.

Essentially, a Codex standard is a combined standard of identity and a minimum standard of quality. These standards deal with composition, additives, labeling, and related factors.

Standards developed by the commission are for voluntary use by the 114 member governments. When a country accepts a standard, it becomes mandatory for domestic and imported products within the country.

The United States has accepted several recommended Codex commodity standards.

["USDA Grade Standards for Food and Farm Products" (AH-533) lists all USDA grade standards and tells how to obtain them. For a copy of AH-533, write to Information Division, Food Safety and Quality Service, Room 1078-S, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.]

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